John H. Arnold and Sean Brady (Eds.)

*What is Masculinity? Historical Dynamics from Antiquity to the Contemporary World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 461 pp. £72.00 (hardcover), £19.99 (paper).

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It has been nearly twenty-five years since the publication of Michael Roper and John Tosh’s *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (Routledge, 1991), twenty since the appearance of Tosh’s *History Workshop Journal* article ‘What should historians do with masculinity?’ (*History Workshop*,No. 38 (1994), pp. 179-202) and a decade since Stephan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and John Tosh edited *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester University Press, 2004). Each seminal in its own way, these three publications have shaped the British historiography of masculinity for nearly quarter of a century not only through their analysis of historical subjects as they are inflected by masculinity, but also through their locating of the discipline within the broader political projects of the histories of gender and sexualities. Over time the meaning of those projects has changed, as has the significance of the history of masculinities in particular to them, with important implications not only for historians but also for others in related disciplines, including anthropology, sociology and literary criticism.

It is the challenges posed by these developments that this new collection, *What is Masculinity?*’ sets out to address. As the expansive title suggests, it is a large volume, running to over 460 pages in hardback and containing over twenty essays on subjects ranging from sexual relations in Classical Athens as depicted in pottery to memories of Canadian fatherhood drawn from oral history sources. Nor is the volume’s breadth derived only from its *longue durée* perspective of the history of masculinity. It also takes an explicitly interdisciplinary and transnational approach, with chapters on anthropologic theory and Samurai masculinity seeking to complicate a Western, indeed often Anglo-centric, view of the historicization of gender.

Given the range of material tackled, some chapters are more successful than others. Diedrik F. Jansen’s discussion of ‘Reading Masculinity through Anthropology’ is decidedly jargon-heavy, making for rather heavy going, while Kasumi Miyazaki’s contribution on the novels of Natsumo Soseki, as the only chapter to tackle specific representations of masculinity in a non-European context, cannot help feeling like something of a token gesture. Some, however, are genuinely groundbreaking in their approach and analysis. Simon Yarrow’s ‘Masculinity as a World Historical Category of Analysis’, for instance, draws on comparative methodology to explore the relevance of ideas of hegemony to our understanding of masculinities in a global context in ways that illuminate not only transnational cultural comparisons but also changing understandings of masculinity over time. On a more focussed scale, Clare Makepeace’s discussion of British servicemen’s use of *maisons tolerées* in First World War France suggests an entirely original approach to exploring the relationship between war and gender. The chapters relating to early modern masculinity are uniformly strong, testament to the depth of scholarship in this particular field that has been developing in recent years, while Jacqueline M. Moore’s chapter on ‘Cowboys, Cattlemen and Competing Masculinities’ is not only an intriguing discussion of the relationship between masculinities and capitalism in late 19th-century America, but also a thoroughly good read.

Perhaps the most intriguing and challenging chapter, however, is that contributed by John Tosh, whose significance to the field and its development is demonstrated by his editorial and authorial contribution to the three publications cited at the beginning of this review. Provocatively title ‘The History of Masculinity: An Outdated Concept?’, the chapter challenges historians of masculinity to rethink their methodological approaches to the field as a way of reinvigorating the political project behind the historicization of masculinity and gender. In line with recent historiographic arguments made by scholars such as Tracey Loughran, Tosh challenges the dominance of cultural history in the field, arguing instead for ‘a culturally inflected social history which keeps its moorings in social experience’ (31). Where Loughran, in her recent *History Compass* article (*History Compass*, [Volume 11, Issue 9,](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/hic3.v11.9/issuetoc) September 2013, pp. 727–738), advocates a psychoanalytic approach derived from material cultural sources, Tosh focuses on the distinction between representational sources and those which illuminate lived experience rather than cultural discourse, particularly in the contexts of imperial history and the history of fatherhood. The case he makes for this approach is a powerful one, although he never fully acknowledged the extent to which cultural historians, including some whose work is published in this volume, are already seeking to grapple with how personal narratives (both written and oral) should be situated in relation to contemporaneous discourses of masculinity. Tosh’s concluding call for ‘a body of historical material, grounded in men’s experience in the past, which touches some of the most keenly felt issues in gender politics today’ (31-2), however, remains a timely and exciting challenge to the discipline.

Tosh’s chapter thus encompasses much of both the strength and weakness of this volume as a whole. Hugely ambitious in scope, and consequently somewhat daunting, the quality of the contributions is more variable than it might have been with tighter editing. Similarly, not all the chapters manage to engage with each other as closely as one might hope. There is, nonetheless, more than enough material that is informative, original and challenging to the historian of masculinity of any period (although possibly not of any region) to make this an invaluable collection of scholarship and seminal in its own right, potentially helping to define the field and its direction for years to come.